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Approved For Release 2004/08/25 : CIA-RDP79R01142A002100010010-1

NSC

13 MAY 75
(morning)

13 May 1975

DCI BRIEFING FOR
13 MAY NSC MEETING

THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

- I. The Mayaguez is at anchor just off Koh Tang Island, about 30 miles southwest of Kompong Som.
 - A. Until late yesterday evening, the ship was being held near where it was seized in the vicinity of Poulo Wai Island, about 40 miles further to the southwest.
 1. Shortly after midnight, however, an American reconnaissance aircraft observed the ship at Koh Tang Island.
 2. At least two US reconnaissance aircraft have reported receiving small arms fire from a gunboat, and from the Mayaguez itself.

25X1 B. A Khmer Communist [redacted]

25X1 [redacted] stated that 42 Americans and nine Vietnamese would be taken to Koh Tang.

1. The latest US reconnaissance flight observed the crew being transferred from the ship into a tugboat.

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2. Although the men could be moved to the mainland at any time, the Khmer Communists may intend to keep them on the island until some final decisions are made regarding the crew and vessel.
3. So far, the Khmer Communist government has not made a public statement regarding the Mayaguez, and Prince Sihanouk today in Peking denied any knowledge of the incident.

II. In the event of a US military effort, the Cambodian Communists would have limited means of reacting.

- A. They would attempt to resist a recapture of the ship, an attack on the accompanying patrol craft, or a landing on Koh Tang. They presumably have few troops or weapons to meet any such effort, however.
- B. The Cambodian Communists have no capability to thwart a mining effort against Kompong Som, and the harbor defenses are not impressive. The port and military camp are exposed and separate from the town.

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C. In either case, the Communists might decide to kill or threaten to kill the crew of the Mayaguez.

1. They are hard-liners, and their actions indicate that they are prepared to take extreme measures.
2. They have shown little disposition to back down on other matters or to give weight to international opinion in shaping their policies.

III. The first third country reactions to the incident are now coming in. The Communist countries in general are not likely to make a major effort to persuade the Cambodians to give up the ship, but China at least provides a channel of communications.

A. On the other hand, the Communist states also will not actively support the Cambodians, except with propaganda.

B. A TASS dispatch today noted the movement of a US naval task force to the Gulf of Thailand, and added that the Mayaguez "according to some reports was engaged in intelligence activities."

IV. Thai Prime Minister Khukrit has made a strong de-

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marche to the US charge in Bangkok that any US re-taliation against Cambodia should not in any way involve Thailand.

- V. The other countries in the area will be particularly attentive to the outcome of this incident.
 - A. If the Cambodians are successful in their effort, it will be perceived as another indication of US weakness and lack of resolve, particularly so since US citizens and the principle of international rights of passage are directly threatened.

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The former Cambodian government claimed twelve miles of territorial waters along the mainland coast and around offshore Cambodian islands. The Mayaguez was seized about eight miles from one of these islands. Phnom Penh's claim to the entire continental shelf in this area of the Gulf of Thailand related only to resource exploitation. It in no way restricted the free passage of shipping outside the twelve mile limit.

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Poulo Wai Island

There are two small islands -- an East and a West Poulo Wai. (Some sources consider only the east island as Poulo Wai, and regard the west island as unnamed.)

- Terrain on both islands is basically flat, with a few small hills and no mountains.
- Some vegetation but no heavy jungle.
- Airstrip is located on the east island. Runway estimated at maximum length of 3,000 feet. A Cambodian naval commander (now a refugee in the Philippines) who left the island on April 19 states that airstrip was operable as of that date.
- Island's defenses: Until Khmer Communists took over, the Cambodian Navy normally stationed 60 men on the island, and has two 75 mm gun emplacements there, one on northern tip of the eastern island, and one on southeastern tip of eastern island. There were also several 12.7 machine guns, M50 machine guns, and an unknown number of mortars on the island. The west island apparently had no defenses, and there was nothing on it except a few natives and an inoperative lighthouse.
- Whether the Khmer Communists have done anything to maintain or strengthen the defenses on the eastern island is unknown.
- Some Americans and French were on island as of April 19: the Cambodian naval commander who left the island on April 19 alleges that when he departed there were still "some Americans and French who work for Elf Oil Company left on the island." These individuals reportedly worked an oil rig about 20 miles to the south of the island where exploratory drilling was underway. We have no information on the present location of these Americans and Frenchmen.

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